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DANIEL WEBSTER

AN ADDRESS

COMMEMORATING THE BIRTH OF DANIEL WEBSTER
AT HIS BIRTHPLACE AT FRANKLIN, N. H.
AUGUST 28, 1913

DELIVERED BY

HON. SAMUEL W. McCALL

PRESENTED BY MR. SMITH OF MICHIGAN

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DANIEL WEBSTER.

[Address of Hon. Samuel W. McCall at the birthplace of Daniel Webster, at Franklin, N. H., Aug. 28, 1913.]

You do me an honor which would more worthily be borne by a son of New Hampshire when you ask me to speak to you on an occasion especially commemorating the kinship between Daniel Webster and this splendid little Commonwealth. She is the proud mother of many great sons. In art, in letters, in oratory, in statesmanship, and in whatever contributes to our civilization the Nation indeed owes her a heavy debt. But I think I may say without disparagement of the others that we meet to-day to do honor to the greatest of her children. Proud as you are of Webster, you recognize that his fame is no mere local concern of your own, but a precious possession of the whole Nation. And you consecrate this place to-day as a national shrine to which all Americans may come and have their patriotism rekindled.

It is a very human trait that leads us to commemorate on all suitable occasions the lives of great men. We celebrate their birthdays. We look for the anniversaries of great happenings associated with their fame and commemorate them. We seek out the spots where they were born, the houses in which they lived, and we affectionately mark them. And the Scotch, as if shrewdly to note the event which makes reputations secure; celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the death of their great poet. It is a good trait, but it would be a better one if men would not so often fail to show their appreciation while the object of it still lived. It is a poor requital that the loving homage of later generations can make for the cold neglect which contemporaries have bestowed upon some man of genius.

But among all the occasions of the character of which I have spoken there is none that comes quite so closely to the heart or so vividly brings the life of a great man before us again as that which we observe to-day. It is more than an occasion based upon the calendar when we strive for a brief moment to arrest the steady and resistless flight of time. When we celebrate the birth we celebrate the dawning of a fame. It may have been a birth under most unpromising surroundings, shadowed by poverty and want. It may have been upon a bleak hillside in some poor country, the boundaries of which hold none too good opportunities even for its most favored children. But it is given those who follow to see the end from the beginning and not to be shut in by the doubt and darkness that envelop the cradle. Thus it is that the Christian world takes its inspiration from the manger at Bethlehem. Thus it is that we seek out the little hut where Lincoln was born as marking the spot where heaven touched the earth and wrought a prodigy. And so to-day you bid

us come to the birthplace of Daniel Webster and to gather strength from looking upon the same hills and fields and valleys that he first looked upon on his coming into the world. Here and in the near neighborhood he made his home until he came to manhood. Spread out before you are the fields over which his young feet sped. Not far away you may hear the plashing of the river and the singing of the brooks where the old English sailor taught him to fish. Here were his father and mother and his brother Zeke, between whom and himself there was a comradeship which may serve forever as an example to brothers. All these scenes were absorbed by his young spirit and became a part of the fiber of his being. How our patriotism is stirred as we consider the wondrous destiny that was wrought out between the first glimpse of the world taken upon this spot and the last weary look out of the Marshfield windows.

It surely was not an unpropitious beginning of a career. Poverty there was in plenty. But there was a certainty that hard work would wring a living from the soil, and there were great stores of health in the bracing air of these hills. Poverty of that sort is far better than the luxury which pampers and clogs the child of fortune. It sets the mind and body at work and gives them the necessary discipline of labor. It awakens the combative energies and fosters self-reliance, independence, and fertility of invention.

There was a fitness in the time of his birth. It was almost coincident with the birth of the Nation, with the infinite possibilities that lay before it, and with its political mechanism still to be shaped and developed so that it might serve the chief ends of government, both in peace and war. And so his great work waited for his coming. He learned the history of his country first hand, from a father who had fought in two wars, had served under the eye of Washington, and borne an honorable part in winning our independence. He was reared in a home that was pure and sweet. He could have been brought up with no sturdier stock of men than those who lived about him, and his contact with them strengthened his native qualities of self-reliance and courage. He was sent to two noble institutions of his own State, Exeter and Dartmouth, already strongly established, and he was educated for the bar under happy auspices. He must then be accounted fortunate in the beginnings of his life and the early associations which clustered about him. He was not, to use Burke's phrase, "rocked and dandled into a legislator," but he was disciplined in a far better school for a youth of heroic mold, and it may be doubted whether any great man was ever better born and nurtured to be a statesman.

To do him justice to-day, one has only to speak the general acclaim of his countrymen. His life left no hard riddle. It did, indeed, end in bitterness and sorrow. But no calumny could mar the brightness of his day, and the half dozen decades that have rolled away since his death show him to be one of the mountain summits of our history. In the swift movement of that time, how many of the lower levels have sunk below the horizon? How quickly even great men have disappeared from the common view. But Webster glitters in the air. He looms up even more grandly than he did a half century ago. We can comprehend more clearly now the greatness of the work he did and we can see that his fame is destined to increase with the growth of the Nation he did so much to fashion and to preserve.

He had more than one unique distinction. For more than a quarter of a century he was by general consent the leader of the bar of his country. His superb argument in the Dartmouth College case, made when he was 36 years old, set a new standard even in our highest tribunal, and thence onward his services were sought in the most important causes before the Supreme Court and especially in those involving constitutional questions. He acquired a weight second only to that of the court itself, and his opinion is cited to-day as high authority. His argument in the Knapp trial, remarkable in its effect upon those who heard it, will, in its published form, defy comparison with any other argument ever made to a jury. If he had never become distinguished in other fields, his preeminence at the bar would insure him an enduring fame.

But his preeminence as a lawyer was the least of his great distinctions. As an orator he attained a place alone among his own countrymen, and it is doubtful if he is surpassed by any orator who ever lived. He will stand the dual test of the immediate effect and the permanent value of what he said. He is preeminent judged by either test alone, and judged by a combination of the two I do not know where his rival may be found. The immediate effect of speech is of the first importance in fixing the quality of an orator. The agitation of small matter with great wit, the vehement displays of passion, will not make a great orator, even if the listeners at the moment are strired to the point of frenzy. On the other hand, we should not accord the rank of a great oration to a literary masterpiece delivered in a decorous and drowsy fashion and leaving the audience in a condition for slumber rather than action. Much as we should prefer the literary masterpiece to the empty declamation, the former would have failed at the moment, just as the latter succeeded even if it had succeeded also in cheapening a cause for the next day and all subsequent time. A great speech must make a deep impression at the time of delivery. It must also bear permanently the marks of real intellectual power. Mere leaders of mobs can not take their place among the great orators, however effective they may be at the moment. Neither passion nor reason can bear the palm alone, but great speaking, as Macauley said, must show a fusion of both. It is difficult to exaggerate in the imagination the immediate effect of the speaking of Webster when he was fully aroused. George Tichnor, who was far from emotional, said of the Plymouth speech, "His manner carried me away completely—it seems to me incredible—three or four times I thought my temples would burst with the gush of blood." Opinions like this might easily be multiplied concerning his other great speeches. His manner kindled great crowds, as it did Tichnor.

We must take account of his physical endowment for speaking. His voice ran the whole range, from the high penetrating tones to the rich organ notes, and its power enabled him to address men in acres. The majesty of his appearance lingers in his portraits and can be seen in every kind of art which has perpetuated his features. He had no need to pose, since the highest effect he could hope to attain could be no more impressive than the natural expression of himself. The black eyes, big and brilliant, the massive and noble head, with wide-arched brows, the strong and stately figure, the face looking as if carved out of granite and yet speaking in every line, all gave the idea of tremendous power. No other figure of his time was com-

parable in the impression it made upon the general mind. He seemed much larger than he was. William Lloyd Garrison, who differed from him very widely, speaks of his "Atlantean massiveness" and adds "his glance is a mingling of the sunshine and lightning of heaven; his features are full of intellectual greatness." To the same effect, but more picturesque, were Sydney Smith's characterizations, a "steam engine in trousers" and "a small cathedral all by himself." Many similar opinions might be cited from Carlisle, Hallam, Theodore Parker, and other notable men upon both sides of the Atlantic. This magnificent appearance was fully matched by the character of his speech, and when he was deeply stirred and animated by a dramatic talent, which was almost the greatest of his qualities, one does not need to be told by his contemporaries that the effect of his speaking was astounding.

Fox's epigram upon Thurlow, that no man could be as great as he looked, was often leveled at Webster. But when one regards the high mark Webster sometimes reached in his speeches, one can wonder whether any man could look as great as he was. The speeches of his mature years show most strikingly the literary quality and yet they had no trace of the spoken essay. First and foremost and throughout them all they were speeches, and showed none of the tricks and pedantries of the literary art. His first object had come to be to give suitable expression to his thought, and his style became simple and majestic because his thought was simple and majestic. It was shaped by the multitude of occasions which he encountered and mastered. He was never consciously constructing masterpieces and painfully fashioning built-up periods for succeeding generations to admire. If he made a great speech it was because a great occasion demanded it. He never wasted his oratory or tried to speak better than he could, but he naturally rose to the demand that was made upon him. If the occasion was a commonplace one, he did it the justice not to exaggerate it. If it was a very great one, he never fell below it. Thus his swelling flow of speech moves on like a mighty river seeking its level under the certain impulse of the law which governs it, now spreading itself out in languid flow, now rising to meet the obstructions in its path and rushing on, splendid and resistless, over every obstacle.

From the 18 volumes of his works that have been preserved one can extract much that is not literature and never was intended to be literature. He can find a good deal of dry reading. When he was writing his farmer about the planting of crops, or making a speech upon a ceremonial occasion, he did not assume the grand manner. But from those volumes may be gleaned a great mass of genuine literature, perhaps a greater mass than can be credited to any other American, and some of it deserves to rank with the best prose in the English tongue. But in judging it we must remember that far the greater part of it was in the form of speech, and he would have fallen short of being the great orator he was had he subordinated the orator to the essayist. Literary pyrotechnics were little to his taste, neither would they have served his purpose, which was usually the severe one of swaying the judgment while he banished the prejudice of those who heard him. Rarely did he permit himself to make an appeal to prejudice, but he sought to influence the action of men through an appeal to reason.

The difference between a speech which is real literature of its kind and a speech which is literature of another kind may be seen by reading a great speech of Webster's by the side of one of Burke's. Take the speech of the former, ambitiously called the "Constitution and the Union," but which has made the 7th of March as famous as the ides of the same month, and which will always be named from the day on which it was spoken. I am not now referring to the controverted questions put in issue by that speech but to its form and structure, and in form and structure, while it was not his greatest speech, it was yet a very great one. It is simple, conversational, and yet condensed in style, consecutive and reasoned from beginning to end, rising naturally to heights of eloquence, and one can read every word of it at a single sitting and feel his interest increase to the end. If the same severe test be applied to a speech of Burke's of equal length one will find himself disposed to hurry over parts of it. He will indeed become enraptured by magnificent outbursts here and there but he will find it discursive, amplified with the completeness of a philosophical essay, and lacking the simplicity and driving force necessary to command the attention in a speech. If one could leap from peak to peak he would find Burke's speeches delightful reading, but if he must toil painfully across the intervening ravines and valleys he may easily understand how it was that that superb rhetorician and philosopher came to be called the dinner bell of the House of Commons.

The great debating speeches of Webster reflect the battle note. One can appreciate the enormous difficulties upon him when he arose to reply to Hayne and can understand the concern which was felt by his New England friends. As he proceeded we see these difficulties vanish one by one until he has surmounted them all with ease. His reply to the personal attack upon himself was crushing in its effect. Instead of widening the sectional breach by the character of his defense of New England he outshone his antagonist in the eloquence with which he eulogized South Carolina and, trampling sectionalism under his feet, he made his immortal plea for nationality and union. Judged by its immediate effect, by its intrinsic quality and the momentous influence it exerted upon the development of the Nation it must be accorded the first place among all speeches of statesmen. As a maker of history it takes rank with the great decisive battles of the world.

As an intellectual product the reply to Hayne was at least equalled by others of his speeches. When was there such another plea made to a jury as that in the White murder trial? A great lawyer once said to me that he placed this speech by the side of Macbeth. It has the rapidity of motion, the dramatic fire, the passion, and the command of the springs of human action which bring to mind the greatest of tragic writings.

He had the vision of the poet as well as the grasp of the statesman. There is indeed a vast richness of the sane imagination in such passages as that on the greatness of England, or in the speech at the laying of the corner stone of the Bunker Hill Monument of which he said, "Let it rise, let it rise till it meet the sun in his coming. Let the earliest light of the morning gild it and parting day linger and play on its summit." There is no redundancy here. There is no

pretense, and there is the upward sweep as unerring, strong, and darting as the flight of an eagle.

He never seemed to labor. He attained his great heights easily and without effort. When extravagance of expression was the rule he practiced a severe restraint. He did not indulge in the style of oratory which spends superlatives upon trifles and leaves nothing for the great emergencies of the State. Such an example was never of greater moment than at a time when every economic difference is exaggerated into a momentous issue, has lavished upon it all the passionate declamation which should be reserved for threatened liberty, and when the cause of every self-seeking candidate is made synonymous with the stability of our political and social structure. His reason and imagination worked together and he sometimes ventured on prophecies which were fulfilled with startling literalness. Ten years before the Civil War, in speaking at the laying of the corner stone of the extension of the Capitol he addressed "the men of western Virginia" and asked "Do you look for the current of the Ohio to change and to bring you and your commerce to the tide waters of the eastern rivers? What man in his senses can suppose that you would remain part and parcel of Virginia a month after Virginia had ceased to be part and parcel of the United States?" Virginia was declared to be out of the Union on May 23, 1861, and the Legislature of West Virginia was organized on July 2 of the same year.

His literary quality is shown not merely in speech, but in writings which were never meant to be spoken. Mr. William Everett quotes Samuel Rogers, whom he terms "a remarkably fastidious judge," as saying he knew nothing in the English language so well written as Webster's letter to Lord Ashburton upon the subject of impressment of seamen. Whether this praise be too high or not, I do not know where there can be found in English a state paper that is its equal in dignified and restrained power and in weight of compact argument. It was followed by no treaty, but it put an end to the discussion of a question which had been a disturbing one for more than half a century and had brought about one war. Nothing remained to be said upon the subject.

But great as were Webster's attainments as a lawyer, orator, and master of English style, yet if we thought of him in a single relation it would be as a statesman. Undoubtedly much was due to the harmonious blending of all his great qualities, and the lawyer and the orator were in large part responsible for the statesman. But he possessed a peculiar quality of mind which made him right upon the mightiest issue in our history, and he had that dignity and distinction of character which ennobled every cause he touched and helped put our Government upon a loftier plane. He was not merely the greatest orator, but the most stately figure in the politics of his time. He was national minded. Without seeking expansion through imperialism and conquest, he inevitably took that view of his country and its institutions compatible only with its unity and greatness. There was an affinity between the aspirations of his nature and a great and free country, and it is impossible to imagine him upon the side of a national government with no real power and subject to the discords and varying whims of a score of little sovereigns.

Our political literature was full of support for nullification. Calhoun's belief in it had been strengthened, if indeed he did not first learn it, in New England itself. There was no State in which it did not find lodgment and in some portions of the Union it was the prevailing belief. In the loose thinking of the day there seemed a necessary connection between individual liberty and that exalted notion of State sovereignty which made the Constitution a mere compact and not the charter of a nation. Webster inevitably ranged himself upon the side of nationality. He became its prophet. All his splendid talents he devoted to its service. He spoke in the very crisis of our history, when difficulties were appalling, and when the development of our institutions might easily have put nullification in the ascendancy, and he spoke with an effect which was augmented with the flight of time. It is not extravagant to say that had it not been for him we should not to-day be one Nation. What more glorious distinction than that could a statesman have?

And then there is the calm dignity with which he bore himself. If the statesman's calling shall ever be put upon the level of the auctioneer's, as sometimes seems not unlikely, it will be only after the influence of Webster's example shall have ceased. He had an instinct for public service but he had high notions about the lengths to which one should go to secure office. He weightily declared that solicitation for high public office was inconsistent with personal dignity and derogatory to the character of the institutions of the country. He lived up to that declaration. He retired from the House of Representatives and twice again from the Senate. He resigned as Secretary of State to take up his law practice. He had an ambition to be President but he destroyed his fairest chance of winning the office when he was asked by a powerful body of men for a pledge regarding appointments to office and he refused to make it. "It does not consist" he said, "with my sense of duty to hold out promises, particularly on the eve of a great election the results of which are to affect the higher interests of the country."

More than once his motives were assailed, but, excepting when he turned upon one slanderer and annihilated him, his only answer was to elevate his office by the manner in which he carried himself. He had nothing in common with the small breed of clamorous politicians who defame their own virtue by always vaunting it. During the five years when he represented our Government before other nations as Secretary of State he elevated his country in the eyes of the world. If Carlisle was willing to back him "as a parliamentary Hercules against the whole extant world," his matchless series of state papers, from that on Impressment to the Hülsemann letter, establishes his equal preeminence in that field.

He believed profoundly in popular government, and his democracy was bred in the bone. The Democrats were not democratic enough, he once declared. They were aristocrats. He was opposed to the caucus because it made "great men little and little men great. The true source of power is the people." The theme of his noble Greek speech was against the theory that society should not have a part in its own government. But he believed in a popular will worked out in laws passed by representative assemblies, and was against anything resembling autocracy. The contest of the ages, he once said, has been to rescue liberty from the grasp of executive power. He

seemed the embodiment of the ideal of the Greek poet, "The ordered life and justice and the long, still grasp of law, not changing with the strong man's pleasure."

I shall not reopen the controversy which so long disturbed the country over the 7th of March speech. If the making of the speech is conceded to have been a mistake, one can find comfort in the saying of Mr. Thomas B. Reed that the man who never made a mistake never made anything. But I fancy that some of the worst things said about that speech were said by those who never read it. Whether or not the speech did much to avert disunion at that time, it is, I believe, amply sufficient to fight its own battles. But from the standpoint of his happiness it would have been better far for him if his good angel had led him out of public life before he made it. It set upon his track the cry of calumny as it has rarely followed any man. Except as it embittered his last hours, how petty it all now seems. With so much falsehood and so little truth, how secure and impregnable it leaves his fame.

His faults were those of a great and lavish nature. If he sometimes forgot to pay his debts he often forgot to demand his own due. They said he was reckless in expense. But instead of squandering his substance at the gambling table, according to the common vice among the statesmen of his day, his extravagance consisted in the generous entertainment of friends, in choice herds of cattle, and in the dissipation shown in cultivated fields. If he put Story under tribute to serve him upon public questions he himself would neglect the Senate and the courts and for nights and days watch by the bedside of a sick boy. His faults did not touch the integrity of his public character and were such as link him to our humanity. If he had been impeccable, incapable to err, with no trace about him of our human clay, a Titan in strength but with no touch of weakness, we should be dedicating to-day the birthplace not of a man but of a god. A superb flower of our race he was still a man and he is nearer to us because he was a man. Product of this soil and these mountain winds, of this sky, the sunshine of the summer and of the winter snows, the hardships of the frontier, the swift-moving currents of his country's life, the myriad accidents that envelop us all, we reverently receive the gift and thank God to-day for Daniel Webster as he was. We who meet here may speak for the millions of our countrymen when we do this homage to his memory. We reverence the great lawyer, the peerless orator, and the brilliant literary genius. But most of all we honor the memory of the statesman who kindled the spirit of nationality so that it burned into a flame, who broke through the strong bonds of sectionalism and taught men to regard their greater country, and whose splendid service in making his country what she is and what she may hope to be has won for this son of New Hampshire a lasting and priceless fame.

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